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## LIBERMANN AT RUE LHOMOND

*Conference given at Chevilly on 2 February 1979  
by Fr. Joseph BALTHASAR, CSSp.*

The Venerable Libermann lived at 30 Rue Lhomond (at that time Rue des Postes) from December 1848 to 2 February 1852 – the last 38 months of his life.

1848 was the year in which Marx and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto. It was the year in which the Second Republic was proclaimed in Paris, to be followed, on 2 Dec. 1851, by the 'coup d'état' of Napoleon Bonaparte III, who, a year later, had himself declared Emperor.

Fr. Libermann was unwell for the whole of his stay at Rue Lhomond. He was not completely master of himself; in public he would sometimes stop short; he did not have full control of his speech and sometimes had to retire before the end of a talk. He had terrible migraines which continued for three and four days at a time, and during which he was unable to write even a short letter. He was as if crushed. He was under extreme nervous tension. And yet he kept his interior calm.

Another illness declared itself in 1849 and kept him four months in bed, after which he had to convalesce for five weeks. It was a liver complaint; which he referred to as biliousness and the African fever, though he had never set foot in Africa. In fact, after his death, the doctors found his liver hardened and sclerosed. Fr. Libermann was ill for nearly ten months of the 38 months he spent at Rue Lhomond.

And yet, during those 38 months, we know of 540 letters that he wrote. Thirty-nine of them were written to the Department of Overseas Affairs, and 64 to the Department of Religious Affairs. In 1849 he wrote the definitive Rule for the Congregation. And all the time he received people for spiritual direction.

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At the end of 1848 the Holy Ghost Seminary was going badly and morale was at a low ebb. Fr. Monnet, the former Superior, had just been ordained Bishop, but he could not get a boat to take him out to his mission and he remained in the house until June 1849. He continued to give orders and to confuse everything by his pretensions.<sup>1</sup>

There were many undesirable guests in the house: priests passing through on their way to or (worse) from the colonies; and ex-soldiers, workers and unemployed people who held meetings in the crypt, or even in the chapel when they were too numerous for the crypt.<sup>2</sup>

Things were going so badly that Fr. Le Vavas seur wanted to close down the Holy Ghost Seminary. But Fr. Libermann wrote to him: *You suggest that we close down the Seminary, return to Notre Dame du Gard and abandon the colonies. I am convinced that this would be a serious mistake and one of the gravest offences that our poor Congregation could commit before God.*<sup>3</sup>

By 13 Dec. 1851 (two months before Libermann's death), Fr. Dréano was writing to Bishop Kobès: *The Holy Ghost Seminary has only about 30 students. Though they are few, they are good and even edifying, thank God. Fr. Le Vavas seur, who is the Director in the absence of Fr. Superior, was telling me recently that there are few seminaries in France where there is more piety than here. All our confreres are delighted at the change.*<sup>4</sup>

We have good knowledge of the Seminary's accounts. In October 1850, the Department of Religious Affairs was asked for 50,000 francs. The Superior received 2,000, each of the six directors 1,500, and each of the 55 seminarians 700 – a total of 49,500 francs, leaving 500 francs that could be allocated to a 56th seminarian.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. for example the letter from Libermann to Le Vavas seur, 26 Mar. 1849, N.D.XI, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. N.D.XI, pp. 49, 95-96, 100; Compléments, pp. 124, 128.

<sup>3</sup>Letter written on Pentecost Sunday 1850, N.D.XII, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup>N.D.XIII, p. 750.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Letter to Overseas Department, 29 Oct. 1850, N.D.XII, 439.

In addition, at Notre Dame du Gard there were 10 novices and 28 scholastics (philosophers and theologians), and missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary were working in Africa, Mauritius and Reunion. That was the situation of the Congregation in the last years of the Venerable Father.

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The few members of the original Holy Ghost Fathers who were alive in 1848 did not all help Fr. Libermann in his new task. We have already mentioned Bishop Monnet, who soon left and later died in Madagascar. Fr. Warnet was old and sick and was chaplain to a convent. Fr. Gauthier was a professor of Canon Law. Fr. Loewenbruck was usually away on travels. Fr. Hardy claimed to be ill, and it was he who did most harm to Fr. Libermann, leading the opposition against him. Already in 1844 there had been question of expelling Fr. Hardy from the Spiritan community because of his peculiarities.<sup>6</sup> He was pious (Fr. Warnet, his confrere, said of him: *// a de la dévotieuseté*),<sup>7</sup> but did no work for the community.

He lacked balance and judgement, had a warped mind and gave in to bouts of ill temper. He thought that Fr. Libermann should go back to Notre Dame du Gard and was prepared to use any means to bring this about.

Fr. Hardy got a few seminarians, three deacons in particular, on his side. He persuaded them secretly that they could take liberties as they would not be dismissed from the Seminary except for grave reasons. This began a series of daily *stings*, as Fr. Cabon called them, a sort of subtle war of attrition which would wear down Fr. Libermann – morning and evening, in public, at recreation, at table – constant unpleasant remarks and innuendo, delivered with the air of people who were sure of themselves. There was a sort of truce in this campaign during Lent in 1850.

It began again after, with complaints about Fr. Libermann to the Archbishop. There were also complaints to the Departments of Religious Affairs and Overseas Affairs, saying that

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. N.D. Appendix to Vol. IX, pp. 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Fr. Warnet to Fr. Maujean, 20 April 1852. N.D. Compléments, p. 139.

Government funds were being diverted from their purpose to the benefit of the new Congregation, which was taking over everything. Luckily these calumnies had little effect in the Departments, but in the house relations became more strained. Fr. Hardy went several times to Fr. Libermann's room and heaped abuse on him. Fr. Libermann put up patiently with these attacks, but Fr. le Vavas seur was present for one of them and Fr. Hardy met his match, Fr. Le Vavas seur replying roundly to him and showing him the door.

On 25 May, the three deacons were due to be ordained priests, but Fr. Libermann announced that there would be no call to orders on that occasion.<sup>8</sup> After that things calmed down, at least on the surface.

During the summer vacation Fr. Hardy was offered the choice of retiring to Notre Dame du Gard or of leaving the Congregation.<sup>9</sup> He chose to enter the 'Marie Thérèse' house, 92 Avenue Denfert-Rochereau, which is still a retirement house for the Paris diocesan clergy. He was given a pension of 1,500 francs a year<sup>10</sup> the same amount as was given to the Seminary directors actually in office. But before that settlement was arrived at there were many problems. It was difficult to decide what to do with Fr. Hardy. Should the Society expel him and thus cut off his means of support, or refuse him means of support and then, if necessary, expel him from the Society? The question was discussed at length by the Council.<sup>11</sup>

Fr. Libermann had brought the young theologians from Notre Dame du Gard to study at Rue Lhomond, but at Easter 1850 he sent them back because of the poor spirit at Rue Lhomond. He was accused of having brought spongers into the house, to live on the funds granted by the Government to the Holy Ghost seminarians. He denied the charge.<sup>12</sup> He was accused of not providing proper food, but he pointed out that it was exactly the same as at St. Sulpice (each seminarian had a pound of meat a day).<sup>13</sup> His opponents petitioned the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. 'Affaire de M. Hardy', N.D.XII, pp. 659-660.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Libermann to Fr. Schwindenhammer, 5. Oct. 1850, N.D.XII, 385.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Fr. Dossat, 29 Nov. 1850, N.D.XII, p. 480.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Letter to Fr. Schwindenhammer, 5 Oct. 1850, N.D.XII, p. 385.

<sup>12</sup> N.D.XII, p. 663.

<sup>13</sup> N.D.XII, p. 662.

Department of Religious Affairs that he be removed, and were delighted when the theologians went back to Notre Dame du Gard, thinking that it was at the Department's orders.<sup>14</sup>

Whenever Fr. Hardy heard a good story against Fr. Libermann, he would rub his hands together at recreation, and this was a sign for his followers to gather round. They spread word that Fr. Gauthier, a well-known canonist and professor at the Seminary, had broken the seal of confession. They accused Bishop Monnet, the former Superior, of selling the Congregation and Seminary for a mitre, and accused both him and Fr. Libermann of simony. They said that, though Propaganda Fide had given only 10,000 francs for Guinea, 30,000 francs had been sent, the extra 20,000 being taken from the Seminary funds, which had been granted by the State. Fr. Warnet wrote one day that he was leaving the house because Fr. Hardy had gone so far as to threaten him with a lawsuit. On another occasion Fr. Hardy pretended that he had been poisoned, and Fr. Warnet was indignant and declared that he could no longer live with such a man.<sup>15</sup>

This 'circus' lasted practically until 29 Jan. 1851. On that day Fr. Hardy, who was already at his house of retirement, came to the door at Rue Lhomond at 9 a.m. to make further protestations. As he rang the doorbell, he slipped on the pavement and fell backwards. A heavy cart, carrying water, was passing at the moment, could not stop, and crushed his chest.<sup>16</sup> Fr. Libermann was away in Alsace at the time, and Bishop Lacarrière, hearing the noise, opened a window and gave Fr. Hardy absolution from it. The dying man was brought into the parlour. Fr. Bouix, a former Jesuit who was living at Rue Lhomond, heard his confession, and a Sulpician, Fr. Carbon, gave him the last sacraments. Fr. Hardy died at 3 o'clock the following morning, one year before Fr. Libermann. He had been a constant thorn in Fr. Libermann's side.

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There were difficulties with the Archdiocese of Paris, because one of Fr. Libermann's predecessors, Fr. Leguay, had

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<sup>14</sup>N.D.XII, p. 662.

<sup>15</sup>N.D.XII, pp. 659-663.

<sup>16</sup>Letter to Dr. Libermann, 12 Feb. 1851, N.D.XIII, p. 27.

changed the Society's rule and had taken out all that concerned the dependence of the Holy Ghost Congregation on the Archbishop of Paris. Rome had given its approval, but the Archbishop had not been informed of the change. Fr. Monnet had said nothing, but Fr. Libermann wished to rectify the omission, and had to bear the blame, although he had been in no way responsible for it. It is always difficult to mend broken fences.

Prefects Apostolic had to be replaced in Reunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guiana, and it was Fr. Libermann who submitted to Napoleon III, at that time still President of the Republic, the information for the decree setting up dioceses. The Government granted 95,000 francs for the expenses involved in setting up the dioceses. There was also the less pleasant task of recalling certain priests, and this too fell on Fr. Libermann. In 1850 there were 25-30 requests for priests to be recalled. One was said to be a false priest, and others were accused of being incapable, or a source of disturbance, or vindictive, or scheming, or licentious, or causing strife between whites and blacks, or being *a bit mad but not dangerous, or a socialist who should be dismissed*. . . It was up to Fr. Libermann to try to sort out true from false accusations. There were delays in setting up the dioceses, as it was said that they would have to have a Chapter of Canons reciting the office, or two Vicars General instead of the one that had been appointed, and a seminary in each diocese, etc. All this entailed constant letters to Rome and to the different Government Departments. From the latter there were letters starting with the words *Greetings and Brotherhood*, and one letter addressed to the *Citizen Superior*.

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And then there was the Congregation that Fr. Libermann himself had founded: that of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Those who had been members of it had to be reassured and their criticisms answered. Several of the missionaries had lost their trust in him. The missionaries at Dakar complained of the way Notre Dame du Gard was being run, and it was said that those in charge of the novices and young scholastics were incompetent. Fr. Frédéric Le Vavasseur in

fact was somewhat unbalanced, and Fr. Delaplace showed too much interest in miracles and mysticism. The Director of Notre Dame du Gard, Fr. Schwindenhammer, was said to be lacking in scholarship and in virtue, to be too occupied with his pious women, to attach too much importance to trifles, and to have favourites. Fr. Libermann was accused of sending out young priests to Africa who were unfit to be missionaries. Some of the missionaries stopped writing to either Notre Dame du Gard or Rue Lhomond. Fr. Libermann was upset by this and did his best to reassure his men.

At Mauritius things were going well, except for a slackening in fidelity to the Rule. Elsewhere not enough attention was paid to health. Fr. Clair, who was in charge of the scholastics and was spiritual director of the Brothers, was to leave the Congregation in 1853 (a year after Fr. Libermann died), bring a legal action against it, become a Protestant minister, and finally be committed to a lunatic asylum. As for the Brothers, there were complaints that Fr. Libermann was sending them out to Africa without sufficient technical training, but whenever he wanted to recall one for training, there were loud protests: those who had been declared *incompetent* suddenly became *indispensable*.

On 13 Nov. 1850, Fr. Libermann wrote: *I feel sure that the African climate is partly responsible for the touchiness of some of our missionaries in Africa and their suspicious attitude towards us. . . . The missionaries in Guinea should be first and foremost not men of Guinea but men of God and of the Church, then members of the Congregation, and, as members of the Congregation, they should work for the salvation of souls in Guinea. . . . Otherwise the Congregation would be torn into bits and soon there would be as many congregations as there are missionaries, with only the name and the Rules in common, and the whole thing would collapse.*<sup>17</sup> In a word, Fr. Libermann was struggling against the idea of the missionaries on one side and the Congregation on the other.

On 21 Sept. 1851, he wrote to Fr. Collin: *We have to guard ourselves against the danger inherent in all missionary work: of each community and each missionary taking the work so much to heart that they sacrifice everything to it – the Rule, obedience to superiors'*

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to Fr. Boulanger, 13 Nov. 1850, N.D.XII, pp. 464-465.



*orders, and community spirit... A few years of this and the Congregation would be torn asunder.*<sup>18</sup>

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There were also meetings with priests: from January 1849 to April 1851, Fr. Libermann had 47 meetings with a dozen Parisian priests.

And there was his family to think about. His brother Felix died of cholera in 1849, leaving a widow and three children who needed help. His doctor brother lost his Jewish clientele when he became a Catholic, but Catholics distrusted the new convert, so his clients were mainly religious communities, and religious communities do not pay much. And in 1850 there was the unexpected appearance of the wife of Christophe Libermann. After his conversion, Christophe had left for the United States and he died there. His widow, who was not a very likeable person, asked Fr. Libermann for help. She was unhappy and that was enough for him.

An African priest, Fr. Moussa, also caused problems. Fr. Libermann wrote: *He is intelligent and has good qualities, but his imagination gets the better of his judgement.*<sup>19</sup>

The Prefect of Propaganda Fide wrote to Fr. Libermann to ask him if there should be a Bishop in Haiti, as the ruler of the country, Soulouque, was in favour of one. Fr. Libermann replied: *Soulouque wants a Bishop in Haiti because he wants to be crowned Emperor.*<sup>20</sup>

Other matters to be settled concerned incidents like the Mayor in Guadeloupe being assigned a place in the sanctuary without proper authorization, and a girl being expelled from school in St. Pierre and Miquelon by the Prefect Apostolic, who was then obliged to take her back by the Governor, who was as intransigent as himself. And there were problems too with the first Bishops. The Pope said to Fr. Lannurien: *Bessieux is a*

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<sup>18</sup>N.D.XIII, p. 293.

<sup>19</sup>Letter to Mgr Kobès, 11 Oct. 1849, N.D.XI, p. 177.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. N.D.XIII, p. 252.

*holy man, but he is a simple man.*<sup>21</sup> And Bishop Kobès had no experience<sup>22</sup> he was only 29 years old.

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Such were the last months of Fr. Libermann's life, seen, not through his writings, but from what we know of the facts. He could say indeed: *I now have the right to call myself African like any of you, as I have all the illnesses of Africa: dysentery, pernicious fever, hepatitis.* . .<sup>23</sup>

In the spring of 1851 all his conferences to the novices at Notre Dame du Gard were on the same subject: the need for the missionary to work at his own sanctification. It is at this time too that he wrote his Instructions to Missionaries: *The people of Africa will be converted by the holiness and sacrifices of their missionaries. Be holy and urge all your confreres to be holy; the salvation of souls depends on it.*<sup>24</sup> Three months before his death he wrote to Bishop Kobès: *Missionaries must take their own sanctification seriously.* . .<sup>25</sup> *We must expect all sorts of difficulties and sufferings and remain standing before God in peace, humility, gentleness and full trust in His mercy, despairing of nothing, getting upset at nothing, not rejoicing too much at success or being cast down too much by failure*<sup>26</sup>

Fr. Schwindenhammer had said: *In our Congregation the old men are under 40.* And in September 1850, ten months after his arrival at Rue Lhomond, Fr. Libermann said to Fr. Farochon, Principal of the College at Algiers after being Principal of the College at Abbeville: *God has placed me here and I will not flinch from my duty as long as I'm here. But if anyone wants to throw me out, he can be sure that I will pray for him.* He had already had about as much as he could take.

He died as he had lived, modestly. Death was the last stage that he would go through in practical union with Christ like the rest of his life.

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<sup>21</sup> N.D. Compléments, p. 337.

<sup>22</sup> N.D. Compléments, p. 238.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Fr. Le Berre, 1851, *Lettres Spirituelles*, IV, pp. 687-688.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Letter to Mgr Kobès, 1 Nov. 1851, N.D.XIII, 353-354.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to Mgr Kobès, *ibidem*, N.D.XIII, p. 353.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 352.

Like him we have to listen calmly to the Holy Spirit and to live intensely in the charity of Christ so as to be closer to the poor. The essential thing for us, today as yesterday, is *direct union with the person of Christ and peaceful fidelity to the Holy Spirit*. For, today as yesterday, we can make our own the words of Fr. Libermann: *We are a group of people, united by the will of the master, who alone is our hope. We can make great plans, for our hopes are founded not on ourselves but on Him who is all-powerful.*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Letter to Fr. Briot, 10 Aug. 1843, N.D.IV, p. 303.